

BASILIDES AS AN ARISTOTELIANIZING Gnostic

BY

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Introduction

My aim in this contribution is to argue that the information which Hippolytus provides about Aristotle has not been taken seriously enough.¹ Study of Hippolytus' text on Basilides can 'benefit' our knowledge of Aristotle's philosophy. But a corrected knowledge of Aristotle's philosophy can, in turn, 'benefit'² our assessment of the system which Hippolytus attributes to Basilides and his son Isidorus.

The single point of difference between Aristotle and his teacher

In his *Refutatio* I 20, 3-4 Hippolytus makes a surprising statement about Aristotle's psychology. He says:

In most points he [sc. Aristotle] is in agreement with Plato, except the opinion concerning soul. For Plato affirms it to be immortal, but Aristotle that it continues to exist; and [after these things] that it also vanishes in the fifth body, which he supposes, along with the other four [elements],—viz. fire, and earth, and water, and air,—to be something more subtle [than these], of the nature of spirit.

¹ O. Gigon, *Aristotelis Opera* vol. III 'Deperditorum librorum fragmenta' (Berlin 1987) included not a single text from Hippolytus. On the value of Hippolytus' information about Aristotle, cf. A.J. Festugière, *L'idéal religieux des Grecs et l'évangile* (Paris 1932) 233-251; C. Osborne, *Rethinking early Greek philosophy. Hippolytus of Rome and the Presocratics* (Ithaca 1987); M.J. Edwards, 'Hippolytus of Rome on Aristotle', *Eranos* 88 (1990) 25-29; J. Mansfeld, *Heresiography in context. Hippolytus' Elenchos as a source for Greek philosophy* (Leiden 1992); I. Mueller, 'Heterodoxy and doxography in Hippolytus' *Refutation of all heresies*', *ANRW* II 36, 6 (Berlin 1992) 4309-4374; id. 'Hippolytus, Aristotle, Basilides', in L.P. Schrenk (ed.) *Aristotle in late Antiquity* (Washington D.C. 1994) 143-157.

² For the motif of εὐεργετεῖν καὶ εὐεργετῆσθαι cf. Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 10-11; 25, 1; 26, 10; 27, 11; 27, 12; X 14, 5; 14, 6; 14, 9. For Hippolytus' text, see P. Wendland, *Hippolytus, Werke* vol. 3 (GCS 26) (Leipzig 1916; repr. Hildesheim 1977) and M. Marcovich, *Hippolytus, Refutatio omnium haeresium* (Berlin/New York 1986).

20.6 This philosopher also affirms . . . that the soul of the entire world is immortal, and the world itself is eternal, but that [the soul] in an individual, as we have before stated, vanishes [in the fifth body]. (transl. J.H. Macmahon with changes)³

Hippolytus' statement is remarkable. Judging only by the words used in I 20, 4, we must conclude that Hippolytus attributes to Aristotle the view that the soul consists of a physical body, if a very special, fine body. This would mean that Hippolytus ascribes to Aristotle a materialistic or at least hylozoistic psychology. Such a psychology is not to be found anywhere in Aristotle's extant work. Attempts to connect it with his lost works have been made⁴ but also vehemently disputed.

Yet it is doubtful whether the totality of information about Aristotle's psychology which Hippolytus provides in his critical discussion of Basilides' heretical doctrine⁵ should force us to dismiss this information. Hippolytus tells us here what Aristotle said about the soul, but not what happens to the intellect. In his surviving treatises Aristotle repeatedly affirms that if there is anything immortal in man, it is his intellect.⁶ For Aristotle this has

³ Hipp. *Haer.* I 20, 3-4; 6 (ed. M. Marcovich): καὶ σχεδὸν τὰ πλεῖστα τῷ Πλάτῳ συμφωνός ἐστιν πλὴν τοῦ περὶ ψυχῆς δόγματος· ὁ μὲν γὰρ Πλάτων ἀθάνατον, ὁ δὲ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐπιδιαμένειν, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ ταύτην ἐναφανίζεσθαι τῷ πέμπτῳ σώματι, ὃ ὑποτίθεται εἶναι μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων τεσσάρων . . . λεπτότερον, οἷον πνεῦμα. . . 6: τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὲν ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου ἀθάνατον εἶναι καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν κόσμον αἰδίων, τὴν δὲ καθ' ἕκαστον, ὡς προείπομεν, ἀφανίζεσθαι.

⁴ Cf. P. Merlan, in A.H. Armstrong (ed.), *C.H.E.G.L.M.Ph.* (Cambridge 1967) 40-41 with n. 9. See also J. Pépin, *Théologie cosmique et théologie chrétienne* (Ambroise, Exam. I 1, 1-4) (Paris 1964) 226-234; 475-492.

⁵ On Basilides, see H. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Göttingen 1907) 91ff.; H. Leisegang, *Die Gnosis* (Leipzig 1934) 196-256; G. Quispel, "L'homme gnostique (La doctrine de Basilide)", *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 16 (1948) 89-139, repr. in id. *Gnostic Studies* vol. I (Istanbul 1974) 103-134; J.H. Waszink, 'Basilides', *RAC* 1 (1950) 1217-1225; W. Foerster, 'Das System des Basilides', *NTS* 9 (1962/63) 233-255; R.M. Grant, 'Place de Basilide dans la théologie chrétienne ancienne', *REA* 25 (1979) 201-216; *The Gnostic Scriptures*, a new transl. by B. Layton (New York 1987) 417-444; W.A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule. Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen 1996). My contribution partly aims at modifying the results of W.A. Löhr's discussion of Hippolytus' exposition on Basilides.

⁶ Arist. *Anim.* II 2, 413b24-29. Perhaps he also argued this in his lost work the *Eudemus*. This is the thrust of Themist., *In De an.* 106, 29-107, 5 = Arist. *Eudem.* fr. 2 Ross; 58 Gigon. However, assuming a development in Aristotle's thought, one might suspect that Themistius is harmonizing here between the view of the early Aristotle and a different, later position, as is suggested by J.M. Rist, *The mind of Aristotle. A study of philosophical growth* (Toronto 1989) 166.

to do with the fact that the intellect as intellect has no relationship with any bodily activity.⁷ By contrast, the soul is said to realize its typically psychic activities, such as sense-perception and emotions, 'not without body'.⁸

Now, what does Hippolytus mean in I 20, 3-4? Does he think that, in Aristotle's view, everything in man over and above his visible body survives for a while after the individual's death, but then dissolves⁹ into the fifth element? Or does he attribute a different view to Aristotle, namely that everything in man over and above his visible body survives for a while after the individual's death, ascending to the heavenly regions, and that then the soul (or the soul-body) dissolves in the heavenly ethereal sphere, while the intellect leaves behind the soul-body and is united with the divine Intellect? In any case this view was held in Antiquity¹⁰ and was also connected with the name of Aristotle.¹¹

Precisely the link which Hippolytus makes between Aristotle and Basilides suggests that Hippolytus has such a position in mind. Basilides has a very special theory about a 'threefold Sonship'.¹² By this he means the divine substances present in the World-seed from which the cosmos develops. This Sonship is 'of the same essence'¹³ as the transcendent God¹⁴ who thought out the entire cosmic process. The highest part of that Sonship, immediately after the deposition of the World-seed, easily ascends to its origin, God. But the Sonship of the second category is unable to do this by itself. It therefore clothes itself in 'holy *Pneuma*' and thus is able to ascend.¹⁵ But because the Sonship is 'of the same essence' as the transcendent God and

⁷ Cf. Arist. *Gener. anim.* II 3, 736b28-29.

⁸ Arist. *Anim.* I 1, 403a3-18. Both in 403a6 and a9 we should read ἄνευ σώματος.

⁹ This was later the position of the Stoa. Cf. *SVF* II 774; 822 and R. Hoven, *Stoïcisme et stoïcisme face au problème de l'au-delà* (Paris 1971) 44-65.

¹⁰ See Plut. *Facie* 942F ff.

¹¹ See Procl. *In Ti.* III 238, 19 (cd. E. Diehl); Ps.-Plut. *Vit. Hom.* 2, 128 in combination with 2, 122-123.

¹² Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 7ff.

¹³ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 7; 22, 12-13; X 14, 2.

¹⁴ Hippolytus also attributes to Aristotle a transcendent Intellect as the supreme God, whose activity he describes in the formula from Arist. *Metaph.* A 9, 1074b34 as 'thinking of thinking' (νόησις γὰρ, φησὶν, ἐστὶ νοήσεως). Cf. *Haer.* VII 19, 7. He identifies this God with the highest God in Basilides' system in VII 21, 1. In connection with the notion of νόησις W.A. Löhr, *op. cit.* 182-183, rightly points to philosophical intellectualism in Basilides, but wrongly links this to Plato's theory of science.

¹⁵ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 9-11.

holy *Pneuma* is not, that holy *Pneuma* must be left behind in the end.¹⁶ As a physical body, holy *Pneuma* is part of cosmic reality and subsequently forms the firmament or boundary of the cosmos. But the Sonship ascends to the hypercosmic sphere and to the transcendent God.

This is a very remarkable part of Basilides' theo-cosmology, and we should therefore consider that Hippolytus' statement about Aristotle's doctrine of soul means: the soul dissolves into the heavenly celestial sphere just as Basilides' *Pneuma* dissolves into the cosmic firmament. This leaves the intellect entirely free of corporeality, just as the Sonship in Basilides manifests its true divine nature in the hypercosmic sphere and is united with God.

However, assuming that this is Hippolytus' view of Aristotle's psychology, why should we believe that he is right? Surely anybody who hears such a view being ascribed to Aristotle will shrug his shoulders and see it as typical evidence of general confusion and Hippolytus' confusion in particular?¹⁷

Nevertheless, I want to argue that those who accuse Hippolytus of confusion do so because *their* modern standard interpretation of Aristotle's psychological theory is confused.¹⁸ I will explain this before continuing with Hippolytus.

Aristotle's theory of a special soul-body

A famous (and notorious) text in Aristotle's *De generatione animalium* occurs in II 3, where he says: 'The *dynamis* of every soul seems to have something of another and more divine body than the so-called elements'.¹⁹ This

¹⁶ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 12-13.

¹⁷ See e.g. the judgement of I. Mueller, which I quote in the Conclusion.

¹⁸ I have developed this claim in A.P. Bos, "Aristotle's psychology: diagnosis of the need for a fundamental reinterpretation", *Am. Cathol. Philos. Quart.* 73 (1999) 309-331; "Aristotle's *De anima* II 1: the traditional interpretation rejected", in D. Sfendoni-Mentzou; J. Hartiangadi; D. Johnson (eds), *Aristotle and contemporary science* (New York: P. Lang, 1999) vol. 2; 'Why the soul needs an instrumental body according to Aristotle (*Anim.* I 3, 407b13-26)', *Hermes* 127 (1999); "Aristotle's doctrine of the instrumental body of the soul", *Philosophia Reformata* 64 (1999) 37-51; "'Het gehele lichaam dat waarnemingsvermogen bezit' (Arist. *Anim.* II 1, 412b24-25)", *Alg. Ned. Tijdschr. v. Wijsb.* 91 (1999) 112-128; *De ziel en haar voertuig. Aristoteles' psychologie geherinterpreteerd en de eenheid van zijn oeuvre gedemonstreerd* (Leende: Damon Press, 1999). This alternative view was first suggested in G. Reale, A.P. Bos, *Il trattato Sul cosmo per Alessandro attribuito ad Aristotele* (Milano 1995) 288.

¹⁹ Arist. *Gener. anim.* II 3, 736b29-31: πάσης μὲν οὖν ψυχῆς δύναμις ἐτέρου σώματος ἔοικε κεκοινωνηκέναι καὶ θειοτέρου τῶν καλουμένων στοιχείων.

text, of which no one disputes the Aristotelian authorship, claims that it is essential to every soul (of plant, animal, or human being) that it has a structural connection with the heavenly astral or ethereal element. This connection is manifested in what is called *pneuma* or vital heat in human beings and (higher) animals.²⁰ Aristotle also uses the term 'natural fire'²¹ or even 'psychic fire'²² to designate this life-generating, vital principle. The soul uses this body as its instrument,²³ and the qualities 'hot' and 'cold' of this body are also called instruments of the soul.²⁴

Now, in *De anima* Aristotle declares that the soul 'is not a body but something of a body'.²⁵ This work also contains his famous definition of the soul: 'the soul is the first *entelecheia* of a natural body which has potential for life and is *organikon*'.²⁶ But this definition has always been wrongly explained! Since Alexander of Aphrodisias, 'natural body' has always been interpreted as the visible body of living creatures, and '*organikon*' (almost always) as 'organic' or as 'equipped with organs'.²⁷ But a 'natural body' is always an elementary body in Aristotle.²⁸ And '*organikon*' in Aristotle never means 'equipped with organs' but always 'serving as an instrument'.²⁹ We should reconsider the interpretation of *De anima* and see that Aristotle's definition of the soul there is a comprehensive formula summing up what he said in his biological writings about *pneuma* and 'vital fire' and 'innate heat', to the effect that the soul is the entelechy of a natural body which serves

²⁰ Arist. *Gener. anim.* II 3, 736b35-737a1.

²¹ Arist. *Resp.* 8, 474b10-12.

²² Arist. *Resp.* 15, 478a16; cf. *Gener. anim.* III 11, 762a20.

²³ Arist. *Motu anim.* 10, 703a4-22; *Gener. anim.* V 8, 789b7-12.

²⁴ Arist. *Gener. anim.* II 4, 740b29-32; I 22, 730b11-23.

²⁵ Arist. *Anim.* II 2, 414a20-21 (A. Jannone).

²⁶ Arist. *Anim.* II 1, 412a27-28; b5-6.

²⁷ Cf. Alex. Aphrod. *Anim.* 16, 11; Philop. *In De an.* 217, 13 and the translations by R.D. Hicks (1907); W.S. Hett (1936); W. Theiler (1959); D.W. Hamlyn (1968); R. Bodeüs (1993). Ps. Simplicius takes '*organikon*' as 'instrumental' but his explanation is not aristotelian either. Cf. H.J. Blumenthal, *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in late Antiquity* (London 1996) 94.

²⁸ That *phusikon sôma* also stands for 'elementary body' in *Anim.* II 1 is conclusively shown by a comparison of the words in 412a11: οὐσίαι δὲ μάλιστα εἶναι δοκοῦσι τὰ σώματα, καὶ τούτων τὰ φυσικά with *Metaph.* Z 16, 1040b5-9. Cf. M. Furth, *Substance, form and psyche: an aristotelean metaphysics* (Cambridge 1988) 78.

²⁹ Thus in Arist. *Anim.* III 9, 432b18; b25. S. Everson, *Aristotle on perception* (Oxford 1997) 64, also rejects the translation 'equipped with organs' as being un-Aristotelian. J. Barnes, *CQ* 49 (1999) 121, suggests: 'Perhaps 412b5-6 refers to the whole body (and not to bodily parts) as being organ-like (and not as having organs)?'

it as *an instrument*. This 'natural body' is not a visible, concrete body, but a special, fine-material body which is precisely the instrument that enables the vegetative power of the soul to bring the visible body into being.

The main difference between Aristotle and Plato was that Aristotle distinguished more consistently and precisely between the activity of the intellect (*theôria*, *noêsis*) and the activity of the soul (*praxis*, *phronêsis*). The intellect's activity does not have any relationship with material entities. But the soul cannot realize any of its specific psychic activities without a (viz. an instrumental) body. This is the one (essential) difference of opinion between Aristotle and his teacher Plato.³⁰

Hippolytus indeed offers a very interesting testimony to this interpretation of *De anima* II 1. For Hippolytus is familiar with Aristotle's definition of the soul in *De anima* II 1. He also knows about a treatise in three books on the soul. And he blames Aristotle for failing to present a clear theory of the soul.³¹ We can note here that Hippolytus quotes the definition of the soul and at the same time says in book I that, in Aristotle's view, the soul survives after the death of the individual, but then dissolves into the ethereal sphere. So this must be either evidence of Hippolytus' great confusion or an indication that for him these two statements were not incompatible. In our discussion of Basilides' World-archon we shall see that Aristotle's definition of the soul returns in a highly unexpected place in Hippolytus' exposition.

My claim therefore is that what Hippolytus reports about Aristotle's psychology, that is to say that the soul consists of the fifth element and eventually dissolves in the celestial ether, contains valuable information and should be included in every collection of the 'fragments' of Aristotle's lost works. Hippolytus' text agrees with what we know about Aristotle's lost dialogue *Eudemus*, in which death is reinterpreted as a 'return home' and immortality in the proper sense is attributed to man's intellect. But it also agrees with the view of *De anima*, which presents the soul as an immaterial form-principle indissolubly linked to an 'instrumental body' (*pneuma* or its analogue).³² Aristotle in *De anima* does *not* say that the soul is indissolubly

³⁰ Hipp. *Haer.* I 20, 3; cf. Cic. *N.D.* 1, 13, 33 = Arist. *Philos.* fr. 26 Ross; 25, 1 Gigon: 'Aristotelesque in tertio de philosophia libro multa turbat a magistro uno [Platone] dissentiens.' On this text, see A.P. Bos, *Cosmic and meta-cosmic theology in Aristotle's lost dialogues* (Leiden 1991) 193-195; Ital. ed. 323-326 and J. Pépin, *op. cit.* 140.

³¹ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 19, 5-6.

³² *Pneuma* is present only in human beings and higher kinds of animals with blood.

linked to the visible, gross-material body. The fundamental conception in *De anima*, too, is that on the death of the individual human being the soul leaves the visible body together with its instrumental body³³ and climbs up to the celestial spheres. In this process of the soul's 'liberation' it is able to realize its highest potential, namely its intellectual and really divine activity, the only activity for which it does not need an instrumental body.

Starting from a corrected interpretation of Aristotle's theory of soul, we need to comb through the patristic and Gnostic traditions to see where it was not Plato but Aristotle who exercised the greatest influence.

Outline of Basilides' Gnostic doctrine according to Hippolytus

Now I will briefly sketch the central notions in Basilides' theology as described by Hippolytus. In doing so I will try to indicate the connections between these notions, freely admitting that these connections result from my own reflection on the problems which could be linked to Basilides' position.

Basilides' theology of a transcendent non-being god

A philosophical or religious system is totally determined by its theological conception. Basilides' develops a philosophical notion of God in which God is hypercosmic and in no way forms part of the cosmos or shares in any element of the cosmos.³⁴ Of God it is said only that he is the ultimate cause, as deviser, of all things which have become. Significantly, 'every nature desires for him'.³⁵

This theology is closest to the philosophical theology of Aristotle. There,

In lower kinds of animals and plants the soul-principle operates by means of vital heat.

³³ Cf. Arist. *Anim.* I 4, 408a28; I 5, 411b8; I 4, 409a29; *Resp.* 17, 479a22.

³⁴ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 20, 2-3; 21, 1-2; 22, 2-4. Cf. also X 14, 5 and VII 27, 7. Clem. *Str.* IV 165, 3 = Basil. Fr. 12 (Löhr) also uses the term *ὑπερκόσμιος* in connection with Basilides.

³⁵ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 8: ἐκείνου γὰρ δι' ὑπερβολὴν κάλλους καὶ ὡραιότητος πᾶσα φύσις ὀρέγεται, ἄλλη δὲ ἄλλως. cf. X 14, 3. This central proposition cannot be interpreted Platonistically as a desire for the world of Ideas, as W.A. Löhr does (*op. cit.* 306). It characterizes the transcendent God as First Unmoved Mover. Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* A 7, 1072a26-1072b4; *Phys.* I 9, 192a14-19 (so also W.A. Löhr, *op. cit.* 296 nt. 47 and 315 nt. 111). The 'natural desire' of all men for knowledge (Arist. *Metaph.* A 1, 980a20) is also an expression of this fundamental desire of all things that possess soul. Cf. C. Osborne, *op. cit.* 62.

too, God is the 'first cause', but only as final cause, as object of desire, and not as efficient cause in a strict sense.

By taking this starting-point, Basilides moves away from the theology of Plato's *Timaeus* and that of Genesis 1. This critical distance must be due to his choice of the Aristotelian position.³⁶ Aristotle had forcefully argued that an Intellect solely realizes thinking activity; and that productive activity is proper only to the soul and creatures with soul. Production is a working of matter by means of material instruments. The same applies to reproduction.

For this (philosophical) reason Basilides does not present the supreme God as the producer of the material cosmos. The activity of the supreme God is not manual work but intellectual work.

The World-seed

Wherever he can, Basilides therefore avoids calling God the 'Demiurge' (in the direct sense) of the visible cosmos. Nor does he term God the 'creator' of the visible cosmos. He opts for the metaphor of 'generation' in the biological sense. God is the sower of a World-seed,³⁷ as the principle of the visible cosmos as a Living Being. 'In (the) principle' God created heaven and earth. And 'in (the) principle' there was also the *Logos*.

Essential to the notion of a World-seed is that it contains form-principles which gradually 'develop'. Basilides uses for this the theme of the development of living creatures from an initial phase (in the form of seed or egg) to a mature phase. No one in Antiquity described the dynamics of this development earlier or in more detail than Aristotle.

Phases of world development

By choosing the notion of a World-seed, Basilides arrives at his notion of successive phases of development³⁸ in the generated cosmos. With some justification we can talk about Basilides' view of world history. An essential

³⁶ Cf. A.P. Bos, 'Cosmic and meta-cosmic theology in Greek philosophy and Gnosticism', in W.E. Helleman (ed.), *Hellenization revisited. Shaping a Christian response within the Greco-Roman world* (Lanham 1994) 1-21 and 'Philo of Alexandria: a platonist in the image and likeness of Aristotle', *Stud. Philon. Annual* 10 (1998) 66-86.

³⁷ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 21, 2-5; 22, 1-6. Cf. Löhr, *op. cit.* 308 n. 86. The 'biological' metaphor of 'begetting' seems a regression to the level of ancient mythical traditions. But it can also be seen as resulting from criticism of the metaphor of craftsmanship.

³⁸ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 1; 25, 3-5; 27, 5.

feature of this history is that it not only involves an increase in volume but, more importantly, an increase in the quality of life of the cosmos.

Basilides distinguishes at least three different levels of life: the purely animal life; human life governed by laws and commandments; and a life in perfect freedom. The ages of the world correspond with the phases of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood of the living creature which the cosmos is.

Development in knowledge of God

The phases in the development of the cosmos are connected by Basilides with the notion of phases in the development of knowledge of God.³⁹ All theologies that conceived of God as Demiurge or as Creator of the visible cosmos are presented as radically false, inadequate conceptions of God, characteristic of earlier phases of development in cosmic life.

So he does not spiritualize the anthropomorphic story of Genesis 1, as Philo of Alexandria does, but sees Old Testament theology, like Plato's theology, as *time*-related and *cosmos*-related.⁴⁰ Here the choice of an Aristotelian-type philosophical theology leads to a gap between Basilides' Gnostic (spiritual) theology and the theology of Genesis 1, a gap not found in Philo of Alexandria.

However, this approach is not anti-Jewish but pro-philosophical. The development of Gnosticism along lines which move away from the Jewish conception of God is not primarily due to anti-Jewish sentiments or disappointment in Messianic expectations. It is a consequence of the fundamental hellenistic philosophical conviction that theology must be thoroughly rational.

The final stage of the cosmic development

Basilides imagines the final stage of the cosmic evolution⁴¹ as analogous to the transition described by Aristotle from human life aimed at practical activity to a truly free and divine life in *theôria*. Its essence is that the soul's potential for knowledge of the transcendent world is realized. This requires 'enlightenment'. That which has a potential for intellectuality must make contact with the Intellect-in-act.

³⁹ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 25, 2-4. Cf. Löhr, *op. cit.* 215.

⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Basilides discussed parts of Genesis 1 in a positive sense. Cf. Hipp. *Haer.* VII 22, 3 (quotation of Gen. 1:3) and 23, 1-3 (the notion of 'firmament').

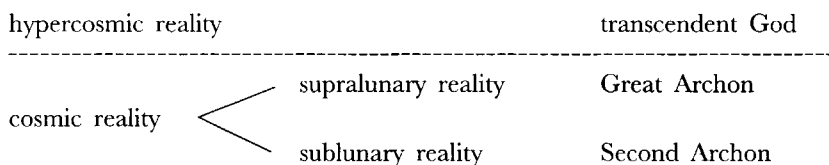
⁴¹ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 26, 1-27, 11.

Basilides describes this process in his discussion of the process of Enlightenment, which pervades all levels of the cosmos and so even penetrates as far as the sublunary sphere.

The tripartition of all reality according to Aristotle and according to Basilides

The division of reality which Hippolytus ascribes to Aristotle corresponds with the division which Hippolytus ascribes to Basilides, namely between cosmic reality and hypercosmic reality. Both go on to subdivide cosmic reality into supralunary reality and sublunary reality.

Diagram:



Both Aristotle and Basilides present hypercosmic reality as free of all elements of which the cosmos is composed and as purely intellectual. Cosmic reality is somatic. Its supralunary sphere is ethereal and the sublunary sphere is composed of the four 'ordinary' elements.

Hippolytus is careful to emphasize that, in both views, Aristotle's *and* Basilides', the supralunary, ethereal sphere is characterized by Providence and divine government, as opposed to the sublunary sphere.⁴² This is a distinction which many authors in Antiquity attributed to Aristotle and no one else,⁴³ and which links up well with the tripartition of reality sketched above.

This system is maintained so consistently in Hippolytus' account of both Aristotle and Basilides that it must be recognized to be deliberate. However, I have to admit that Hippolytus' Greek text in his *Refutatio* VII 19, 3 and 4 raises a serious problem here. This text says that Aristotle identified the

⁴² Hipp. *Haer.* I 20, 6; VII 19, 2-3; 19, 4; 19, 7; 24, 3; 24, 5.

⁴³ Ps. Plu. *Plac.* II 3; Diog. L. V 32; Tatian. *Or.* 2; Athenag. *Leg.* 25; Clem. *Str.* 5, 14; Origen. *Cels.* 1, 21; 3, 75; Eus. *P.E.* XV 5, 1; Gr. Naz. *Or.* 27, 10; Epiph. *Haer.* 3, 2, 9; Thdt. *Affect.* 5, 77, 47; 6, 86, 7; Ambr. *Off.* 1, 13, 48; Chalcid. *In Ti.* 248. Cf. A.P. Bos, *Providentia divina. The theme of divine Pronoia in Plato and Aristotle* (Assen 1976) 5.

outer celestial sphere as the highest reality, and that it is a kind of *fifth* substance, free of all elements of which the cosmos consists, and that for Aristotle this 'fifth substance' is a kind of hypercosmic substance.

In his impressive book *Théologie cosmique et théologie chrétienne* (Ambroise, *Exam. I 1, 1-4*)⁴⁴ J. Pépin explains this text in Hippolytus as attesting to an earlier Aristotelian position, that of the lost work *De philosophia*, in which Aristotle supposedly talked about two aspects of ether, viz. as the substance of the stars and planets and as a kind of hypercosmic substance. However, Pépin's view is entirely based on the hypothesis of a fundamental *development* in Aristotle's philosophy,⁴⁵ and makes something very complicated out of Aristotle's lucid theory of the fifth element, which raises serious questions even in Hippolytus' discussion.⁴⁶

My alternative to Pépin's very scholarly argument is to replace the three occurrences of the word 'fifth' in Hippolytus' text by the word 'first' and to assume that Hippolytus ascribed to Aristotle the view that the outer celestial sphere is free of all elements which make up the cosmos and that he viewed it as hypercosmic substance and as 'first substance' or '*prôtè ousia*'. This reading would then have been 'corrected' by a later scribe who knew that in Aristotle the outerst sphere of the heaven formed part of the cosmos.

I also observe, rather apodictically, that both for Aristotle and for Basilides (in Hippolytus' discussion)

⁴⁴ Paris 1964.

⁴⁵ That hypothesis itself sprang forth from the wrong interpretation of the psychology of Aristotle's *De anima* and especially of the word *ὁργανικόν* in Aristotle's definition of the soul. I take the opportunity to suggest that the word '*operatorium*' that is used for the third of Aristotle's principles enumerated by Ambrose of Mailand in the text that forms the starting point for Pépin's research in this fascinating book, might be understood as the Latin equivalent of Aristotle's *ὁργανικόν*.

⁴⁶ The following problems inhere in this view: (a) a 'fifth' substance implies four others in an identical series. These can only be the four 'ordinary' elements; (b) the outer sphere is said to be 'free of all elements of which the cosmos consists'; so it must be incorporeal; (c) if Aristotle referred to the outer celestial sphere as 'fifth substance', this 'fifth substance' would have to be immaterial, which is at odds with I 20, 4; (d) if the outer sphere consists of an immaterial fifth substance, what are the celestial spheres from the moon to Saturn made up of?; (e) in I 20, 4 and X 7, 4 Hippolytus talks about a 'fifth body' as an Aristotelian dogma; (f) a substance which is emphatically called '*hyperkosmos*' does not provide a sound basis for attribution of a 'cosmic theology' to Aristotle; (g) Aristotle's theology or 'first philosophy' cannot have centered upon a 'fifth' substance.

- (a) hypercosmic reality corresponds to the level of the pure Intellect-in-act;
- (b) supralunary cosmic reality corresponds to the level of the divine beings with soul, and
- (c) sublunary cosmic reality corresponds to the level of mortal creatures with soul and with visible (gross-material) bodies.

Basilides' doctrine of the Great Archon and his Son

Two dogmas are crucial in Hippolytus' account of Basilides' views, but they are also very puzzling. The first is his doctrine of the 'threefold Sonship' and the second the role of the Great Archon, who begets a Son. I will focus here on the dogma of 'the Great Archon'.⁴⁷ In my view, if we can understand the motives underlying this doctrine, it will be easier to grasp the doctrine of the 'threefold Sonship'.

I start by observing that modern studies of Hippolytus' exposition on Basilides have failed to give an adequate explanation of the above dogmas and their specific details.⁴⁸ The following questions have yet to be answered:

- (a) why does Basilides talk about a 'threefold Sonship'?
- (b) how can the World-seed contain a threefold Sonship which is 'of the same essence' as the transcendent God?
- (c) is there any systematic relationship between the 'threefold Sonship' and the Son of the Great Archon, the Son of the Second Archon,⁴⁹ and the 'Sons of God' who need to be liberated from the World-seed?
- (d) why does Basilides talk about 'a Son' of the Great Archon and 'a Son' of the Second Archon, and why are both more excellent than their begetter?
- (e) why, after the great cosmic enlightenment, are the Great Archon and the Second Archon overcome by ignorance, in contrast to their Sons?

My inquiry assumes that the author of the Gnostic system had sound reasons for the details of his system, and that we cannot judge the value of Hippolytus' discussion until we have unearthed these reasons. (Though

⁴⁷ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 23-24.

⁴⁸ Cf. E. de Faye, *Gnostiques et gnosticisme* (Paris 1925) 230; the explanation by G. Quispel, *art. cit.* 111-112, is implausible.

⁴⁹ Cf. W. Foerster, *art. cit.* 254: 'Ein besonderes Rätsel bildet die Gestalt der beiden Söhne der Archonten'.

it is by no means sure that we can do this, given the short supply of relevant information.)

I also note that Basilides' doctrine of the Great Archon has two very interesting features: (1) The cosmic Archon is not a malevolent figure. He has a number of positive characteristics and cannot be represented as an 'evil World-demiurge'.⁵⁰ He does suffer from ignorance and, consequently, from overestimation of his powers.⁵¹ (2) The Great Archon is 'converted' in a process of acquiring Knowledge through (mediated) enlightenment.

Another special feature is that, after the great Enlightenment of all cosmic powers, a great 'Ignorance' comes upon the cosmos. This is a doctrine of the 'end of all things' which is very exceptional too, even in the curious world of ideas prevalent in the second century AD.

In Hippolytus' exposition the World-seed, deposited by the non-being God, brings forth the 'first Sonship' and the 'second Sonship', which, by themselves or aided by holy *Pneuma*, ascend to the divine Origin, that is the object of desire for all things in the World-seed. Hippolytus then talks about 'the Great Archon', who is characteristically distinct from 'the Sonship' in that the Archon is not 'of the same essence' as the transcendent God. He is a cosmic and not hypercosmic ruler since he rises only unto the holy *Pneuma*, which forms the separation between hypercosmic reality and the cosmos.

The Archon is therefore part of somatic reality, more specifically of ethereal, supralunary reality. An essential point is that the Great Archon believes he is autonomous, but in fact is merely the executor of what the transcendent God had planned.⁵² We are told this right after the passage which says that the Great Archon 'first brought forth and begot a Son, much better and wiser than himself'.⁵³ This already suggests that the Son of the Great Archon is more akin to the transcendent God than to the Great Archon himself.

How are we to interpret this information? An essential distinction is between incorporeal reality and material, cosmic reality. Assuming that

⁵⁰ Cf. M.A. Williams, 'The demonizing of the Demiurge: the innovation of Gnostic myth', M.A. Williams a.o. (eds), *Innovation in religious traditions* (Berlin/New York 1992) 73-105.

⁵¹ Cf. Löhr, *op. cit.* 67.

⁵² Hipp. *Haer.* VII 23, 6! Cf. 22, 6; 24, 5.

⁵³ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 23, 5: ἐποίησεν ἑαυτῷ καὶ ἐγέννησεν ἐκ τῶν ὑποκειμένων υἱόν, ἑαυτοῦ πολὺ κρείττονα καὶ σοφώτερον.

incorporeal reality stands for the reality of the Intellect or *noēmata*,⁵⁴ we cannot interpret the Great Archon Platonistically as the incorporeal World-soul. The conception of the Great Archon is too cosmic and somatic for this.

But Hippolytus does make a connection between ether and soul when he says in I 20, 4 that, for Aristotle, man's individual soul survives after the individual's death and then dissolves in ether.

If we want to see the Great Archon as distinct from the transcendent God (= Intellect) in that he belongs to an inferior level of reality (namely that of the Soul), we should consider that, in Aristotle's view, the soul does not exist 'without *sōma*' and is 'something of a *sōma*'.⁵⁵ Aristotle also presented the celestial spheres as possessing (cosmic) life of the highest quality, not because he identified ether with the World-soul, but because he conceived of the celestial beings as beings with soul, whose bodies possessed the highest quality.⁵⁶

We must therefore conclude that Basilides was unable to talk about a Great Archon *tout court* and was forced to introduce another entity, the Son of the Great Archon. In my view, H.J. Krämer was right when he concluded: 'Innerhalb des Kosmos entsteht nun ein μέγας ἄρχων—offenbar die Materie—mit der zugehörige Seele (ψυχή 24, 1) für die Himmels- und Aethersphäre'.⁵⁷

That is to say, in Basilides' conception the cosmic Great Archon is a living being of the highest order in the reality of the cosmos, i.e. a living being with soul. But he remains a living being characterized by *sōma*.

In this connection it is so essential that Hippolytus' account clarifies the duality of the Demiurge and his Son by referring to the heart of Aristotle's doctrine of soul: the Son of the Archon has the same relationship with the Archon as, in Aristotle's view, the soul as entelechy has with the 'natural *organikon sōma*' of which the soul is the entelechy.⁵⁸ Hippolytus cannot

⁵⁴ Cf. Hipp. *Haer.* VII 25, 7.

⁵⁵ Arist. *Anim.* I 1, 403a5-8; II 4, 414a19-21.

⁵⁶ Cf. Arist. *Cael.* II 12, 292a18-292b25; II 2, 284b18-286a2; II 1.

⁵⁷ H.J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Platonismus zwischen Platon und Plotin* (Amsterdam 1964; ²1967) 235. I understand Krämer to mean not 'matter in general' but 'die Materie für die Himmels-sphäre'.

⁵⁸ Hipp. *Haer.* VII 24, 1-2: Αὕτη (δ') ἔστιν ἡ κατ' Ἀριστοτέλην σώματος φυσικοῦ ὀργανικοῦ ἐν(τ)ελέχεια, ψυχή ἐνεργοῦσα τῷ σώματι, ἥς δίχα τὸ σῶμα ἐργάζεσθαι οὐδὲν δύναται μείζον καὶ ἐπιφανέστερον καὶ δυνατώτερον καὶ σοφώτερον. ὃν λόγον οὖν Ἀριστοτέλης ἀποδédωκε περὶ τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ σώματος πρότερος Βασιλείδης περὶ τοῦ μεγάλου ἄρχοντος καὶ τοῦ κατ' αὐτὸν υἱοῦ διασαφεῖ. τὸν τε γὰρ υἱὸν ὁ ἄρχων κατὰ Βασιλείδην γεγε(ν)νηκεν, τὴν τε ψυχὴν (ὡς) ἔργον καὶ ἀποτέλεσμα [ὡς] φησιν εἶναι ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης φυσικοῦ σώματος

possibly have devised this explanation by himself. I believe that Basilides must have given some kind of hint in this direction.

In that case, however, we must understand rightly what the text exactly says about the relationship between 'entelechy' and 'natural *sôma organikon*'. Hippolytus' text makes it clear that he does not view the soul as the 'entelechy of a natural body that is equipped with organs' but as the 'entelechy of a natural body which serves as an instrument (for the soul)'. This is not just a confused, eccentric approach to Aristotle's definition of the soul. Hippolytus gives the *earlier*, and in my view historically correct, explanation of Aristotle's definition of the soul.⁵⁹

Aristotle *never* viewed the soul as the entelechy of a visible body equipped with organs, but always as the entelechy of a special, fine-material natural body which serves the soul as an instrument. Indeed, Hippolytus' text on the Great Archon also provides an important argument for the claim that Aristotle regarded his definition of the soul in *De anima* II 1 as being applicable not only to the sphere of mortal living creatures, but also to the beings with soul that inhabit the celestial sphere.⁶⁰

In Basilides' system, the Great Archon is a living being of the highest quality, but also a being with soul, and therefore a being that is characterized by *development*, under the guidance of the soul as entelechy. The word 'entelechy' already indicates that it is the principle which directs this development towards a *goal*, which is the end-point of the development. The end-point of this development, for a being with capacity for intellectuality, is the realization of intellectuality, i.e. the realization of a mode of existence which has no relationship with corporeal reality.

This insight provides the key to other details of Basilides' cosmogony

ὀργανικοῦ ἐντελέχειαν. ὡς οὖν ἡ ἐντελέχεια διοικεῖ τὸ σῶμα, οὕτως ὁ υἱὸς διοικεῖ κατὰ βασιλείδην τὸν ἀρρήτων ἀρρητότερον θεόν. The text given here differs slightly from that of M. Marcovich. A.J. Festugière, *op. cit.* 249, says of this passage: 'Ce fils est l'aristotélécienne entéléchie du corps physique pourvu d'organes, [à] savoir l'âme qui opère avec le corps . . .', but it seems out of the question that Hippolytus was thinking of a 'corps pourvu d'organes'. In fact, all translators of Hippolytus, in line with the traditional interpretation of Arist. *Anim.* II 1, translate '*organikon*' here as 'organic' or as 'with organs'.

⁵⁹ This earlier interpretation of Aristotle's definition of the soul is also found in Plut. *Plat. quaest.* 8, 1006D and Diog. L. V 33. See my paper 'Plutarch's testimony to an earlier interpretation of Aristotle's definition of the soul', in A. Pérez Jiménez (a.o.) eds., *Plutarcho, Pláton y Aristóteles, Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the Intern. Plutarch Society*, (Madrid 1999) 535–548.

⁶⁰ Despite the claim of Philop. In *De an.* 239, 37–38.

and eschatology. The great cosmic 'enlightenment' is the end of the cosmic development and means: the realization of the awareness of transcendence by all those living beings who possess the potential for this. These are the Sons of the cosmic Archons and the 'pneumatics' among the living creatures in the sublunary sphere. Precisely the fact that, in the grande finale of the cosmic development, the Great Archon and the Second Archon are overcome by ignorance (but not their Sons!)⁶¹ supports the view that the Sons stand for the immaterial entelechy which, after enlightenment, detaches itself from its instrumental body⁶² and is then united with the hypercosmic First and Second Sonship. This point, however, will be discussed at another occasion.

Conclusion

In a recent article I. Mueller assessed Hippolytus of Rome's treatment of the Gnostic Basilides in his *Refutatio* as follows:

"Hippolytus's treatment of Basilides as a proponent of Aristotelianism must seem to most modern readers a bizarre interpretation of a bizarre doctrine. But, whatever one thinks of the reliability of Hippolytus's account of Basilides, there can be no doubt that doctrines equally bizarre were in the air in the second and third century . . .'. However, Mueller concludes: "Everything is, as we have seen, distorted by Hippolytus's polemical aims. I cannot, then, conclude by promoting Hippolytus as a second Alexander of Aphrodisias nor even as one among many interpreters of Aristotle. He can, however, serve as a reminder of how immediate intellectual concerns can lead people to misconstrue and misuse the words of even the greatest authors. And that, perhaps, is a reminder no less important today than it ever was".⁶³

I am not convinced by Mueller's discussion, least of all by his conclusion. True enough, Hippolytus' work has a polemic thrust. He makes no secret of it. But it seems extremely doubtful whether he would advance his cause by producing inferior work that could be easily dismissed by his

⁶¹ W.A. Löhr, *op. cit.* 299-300, fails to note this.

⁶² Just as a seaman leaves his ship when he has ended his voyage. Cf. Arist. *Anim.* II 1, 413a8-9.

⁶³ I. Mueller, 'Hippolytus, Aristotle, Basilides', 157. See also *idem*, 'Hippolytus retracatus. A discussion of C. Osborne, *Rethinking early Greek philosophy*', *Oxf. Stud. in Anc. Philos.* 7 (1989) 233-251. A.J. Festugière, *op. cit.* 251 and J. Mansfeld, *op. cit.* 146 have been as critical as Mueller.

contemporaries. And Mueller's reproach that Hippolytus' comparison of the cosmic Archon and his Son with Aristotle's definition of the soul 'is based on a straightforward misunderstanding of the Aristotelean formula for the soul'⁶⁴ turns against himself. The texts of Plutarch, *Platonicae quaestiones* 8 and Diogenes Laertius V 33 show that Mueller's own position 'is based on a straightforward misunderstanding of the Aristotelean formula for the soul'.

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⁶⁴ I. Mueller, *art. cit.* (1994) 150.